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AUTHOR Murphy, B. Keith
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ABSTRACT

This report attempts to construct a postmodern framework to provide for an analysis of Intercollegiate Forensics. It isolates the major theoretical constructs of postmodernism, applies them to Intercollegiate Forensics, and draws conclusions. The paper maintains that linguistic-based postmodernism consists of four theoretical areas: (1) information economy, or knowledge as commodity and ongoing process, rather than a finite search for truth; (2) digitally as metanarrative, or mass media's role in constructing reality and hyper-reality; (3) power, knowledge, and language, or the role of language in creation and perpetuation of power; and (4) decentering (deconstruction), or empowerment by removal of the false center from language. Each of these four threads is applied to forensic debate in the hopes of gaining pedagogic insights. Findings imply that a sound argument is not necessarily based on amount of supporting data, that the visuality and immediacy of online information is a detriment to liveliness of debate, that language empowerment also implies power loss, and that debate gives voice to groups which would otherwise be marginalized. It concludes that more attention should be given to training students in the use of language as creator of social power. (Contains 12 references and 3 notes.) (EF)

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Fear and Loathing in Forensics: The View From PostModern Suburbia

B. Keith Murphy, Ph.D.
Director of Speech and Debate
Fort Valley State University
Fort Valley, GA 31030
email: Sophist@Bigfoot Com
(912)825-6392
http://www.eng.as.fvsu.edu/bkeith.htm

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> We are all volunteers, he thinks, as he clutches the eyephones and follows his point of view over the edge of a cliff of data, plunging down the wall of this code mesa, its face compounded of fractionally differentiated fields of information he has come to suspect of hiding some power or intelligence beyond his comprehension.
>
> Something at once noun and verb.
>
> While Laney, plunging, eyes wide against the pressure of information, knows himself to be merely adjectival: A Laney colored smear, meaningless without context. A microscopic cog in some catastrophic plan. But positioned, he senses, centrally.
>
> Crucially.
>
> And that is why sleep is no longer an option.
>
> –William Gibson, *All Tomorrow's Parties* (124)

A mere six years have passed since that entity which we call the World Wide Web came into being. Within those six years, the speed and quantity of the flow of information has expanded geometrically. This phenomenon is yet another symptom of what a number of theorists would term Postmodernism (or Post-modernism, PoStMoDeRnIsM, PoMo, or some variation on this theme). While a body of Postmodernist theories has begun to coalesce into a world view, that world view has hardly been unified into any single pedagogical stance. In fact, most postmodern theory is as malleable as the King James Version of the Bible in that any moderately competent debater can find evidence from which to argue nearly any point.

With that caveat in place, this work will attempt to construct a Postmodern framework to provide for an analysis of Intercollegiate Forensics. Toward that end, this work will first isolate the major theoretical constructs of PostModernism, apply them to Intercollegiate Forensics, and then draw some, hopefully, useful conclusions.[1]

Toward an Understanding of PostModernism

Defining a philosophical movement that is in progress is, in many ways, like trying to write a manifesto on the surface of a flowing stream. Postmodernism is, as schools of philosophy go, an incredibly young movement. While others in this panel are discussing the words and ideas of

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[1] A conscious nod to the Structuralists in the crowd.

men dead for centuries who lived in cultures that we know only through history books; Postmodernism is being constructed as we speak, shaped and written by individuals who share our culture, many of which are still alive and still adding to this body of discourse. Honderich addressed this difficulty with defining this movement:

> [Postmodernism] . . . is a 'family resemblance' term deployed in a variety of contexts (architecture, painting, music, poetry, fiction, etc.) for things which seem to be related – if at all – by a laid-back pluralism of styles and a vague desire to have done with the pretensions of high modernist culture. In philosophical terms, postmodernism shares something with the critique of Enlightenment values and truth-claims mounted by thinkers of a liberal-communitarian persuasion; also with neo-pragmatists like Richard Rorty who welcome the end of philosophy's presumptive role as a privileged, truth-telling discourse. (708)

Postmodernism arose as an intellectual counterpoint to the movement known as "modernism." Modernism arose in the first half of the twentieth century as a result of the failures of the age of reason. It is usually represented by William Butler Yeats infamous lines:

> Things fall apart;
> the centre cannot hold:
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

Philosophers faced a twentieth century where the promises of science and reason failed to bring about utopia.

> What did Science, Reason and Progress get us, after all? The 20th century has been nothing if not a dark, Kafkaesque nightmare of rationally administered death camps, death squads, Auschwitz, World Wars I and II, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, ecological disaster – and various systems of totalitarianism. And all in the name of the Enlightenment values of Science, Reason, Liberation, Freedom and Progress! (Powell 10)

For a society of intellectuals who had banked on reason being the savior of mankind, the failure of reason to be that savior left a void in the moral and intellectual center of humanity. Artists and writers were the first to recognize that void, and began the attempt to re-discover what, in truth, is, or should be, at the center of the void left by the failure of modernism.

> "Post Modern" embraces a period from about 1980 to the present, characterized by the emergence of the postindustrial information economy, replacing the previous classes of aristocracy, middle class, and working class with the new paradigm: information elite, middle class, and underclass. The phrase also implies a nation-state challenged by new world views: feminism, multiculturalism, environmentalism, etc; old scientific certainties called into question; the replacement of mechanical metaphors with cybernetic ones. Postmodernism rejects the modernist ideals of rationality, virility, artistic genius, and individualism, in favor of being anti-capitalist, contemptuous of traditional morality, and committed to radical egalitarianism. The most recent feature of PostModernism is the rise of Political Correctness and the attempt to purge dissenting opinion from the ranks of the academic/artistic/professional brahmin caste, together with a systematic attack on excellence in all fields. Post Modernism is an anti-Enlightenment position wherein adherents believe that what has gone before, as "Modernism", is inappropriately dependent on Reason, Rationalism, and Wisdom, and is, furthermore, inherently elitist, non-multicultural and therefore oppressive.(Hartman np)

Thus, Postmodernism. Which is "an attempt to make sense of what is going on now – and we can see the present only in retrospect."(Powell 17) One attempt to define postmodernism begins:

> A rejection of the sovereign autonomous individual with an emphasis upon anarchic collective, anonymous experience. Collage, diversity, the mystically unrepresentable, Dionysian passion are the foci of attention. Most importantly we see the dissolution of distinctions, the merging of subject and object, self and other. This is a sarcastic playful parody of western modernity and the "John Wayne" individual and a radical, anarchist rejection of all attempts to define, reify or re-present the human subject. (Morley np)

Postmodernism differs from those movements which preceded it in that it cares little about the center of things, but rather focuses on **decentering** the act of removing the traditional power structures and forms in an attempt to understand power itself.

The origination of this viewpoint can be traced to the post-Marxist writings of Jean Francois Lyotard. In the seventies, he began to challenge Jacques Lacan's belief that the unconscious mind and language were similar entities. Lyotard reversed this and argued that the unconscious mind is visual, iconic, and figural, a three-dimensional construct communicating desire; while language is only two-dimensional. As such, **language serves to repress desire and**

language is incapable of representing the unconscious (3 - 29). Thus, any attempt to represent desire, in any form, reduces the concept, represses it and **signals that there is always an Other which cannot be represented**.

Lyotard also recognized, in 1974, that technology, especially computer technology, was about to have a significant impact on language and knowledge. He predicted that "**no knowledge will survive that cannot be translated into computer language – into quantities of information**."(Powell 23) He foresaw that information, language, would become a commodity to be bought and sold. As a result, science, philosophy, education will no longer be about discovering truth, but creating information. The focus moves away from attempts to uncover mechanics and moves toward, what Lyotard called **performativity**, a search for which research does well because it can generate more research. Within this self-reflexive circle narrative becomes the ultimate tool in that narrative is used to weave myths and metanarratives justifying the circular research and, as a direct result, produces even more information.

Lyotard's ideas set the stage for the work of Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard is another former Marxist who foresaw the impact of mass media and information technology on humanity. Baudrillard argues that as our view of the **meta-narratives** that we call our "world" are increasingly composed and dominated by television and computers, we have entered a new reality that he holds is based on copies of objects and events. He argues that we live in the "**third order of simulacra**" where reality is determined by the code: "**Digitality** is its metaphysical principle . . .and D.N.A. is its prophet". (63) The codes are systems of information provided by the media which show us how to exist. Baudrillard argues that the code at the heart of all digitality is binary code, the simple on/off, yes/no, 0/1 code which regulates us through identity by negation.

Baudrillard argues that digitality "seems to represent differences but which, in reality, only perpetuates this self-regulating, binary system which only minimizes differences as it toggles back and forth between 'yes' or 'no,' Pepsi or Coke, Republican or Democrat."(Powell 53). Baudrillard extends this argument by holding that through the power of the code, the simulacrum, the copy, the icon (which is composed of language) becomes reality. The media itself creates a kind of **hyper reality** where the portrayal of reality becomes more real than what has traditionally been reality. He called this, the death of the real. This is reinforced by the code in that when we question, the answers are created by the code rather than the real.

The final relevant arguments of PostModernism come from Poststructuralism. The first of those arguments is the simple fact that **all knowledge is textual**. This simple statement is made even more important when added to the work of Michel Foucault. Foucault's main focus was the relationship between **power and knowledge**. Foucault's argument began in *Madness and Civilization* where he demonstrated that much of power is constructed through the application of language to behavior, empowering some behaviors and forbidding others. He extends this argument to include the idea that what is spoken of can be empowering:

> If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of deliberate transgression. A person who holds forth in such language places himself to a certain extent outside the reach of power; he upsets established law; he somehow anticipates the coming freedom.(1990 6)

Foucault sharpened his study of knowledge, language, and power by focusing on the **micropolitics of power** focusing on how power is exerted, through language, in local situations.

The final addition to the pastiche of PostModernism is Jacques Derrida and his examination of the role of "centers." He argues that all Western thought is based on the idea of centers, ". . .an origin, a Truth, an ideal Form, a Fixed Point, an immovable Mover, an Essence, a God, a Presence which is usually capitalized and which guarantees all meaning."(Powell 100) As Derrida writes:

> . . . the fact that universal thought, in all its domains, by all its pathways and despite all differences, should be receiving a formidable impulse from an anxiety about language – which can only be an anxiety of language, within language itself – is a strangely concerted development; and it is the nature of this development not to be able to display itself in its entirety as a spectacle for the historian, if, by chance, he were to attempt to recognize in it the sign of an epoch, the fashion of a season, or the symptom of a crisis. Whatever the poverty of our knowledge in this respect, it is certain that the question of the sign itself more or less, or in any event something other, than a sign of the times. To dream of reducing it to a sign of the times is to dream of violence. (3)

The violence of the center is simply that, by their signification, they exclude others. Those excluded become the repressed Other. Thus, again, we have a binary pair. Those in the center (the privileged) and those excluded by language. Or, perhaps his views on metaphysics provide a clearer understanding:

"Metaphysics - the white mythology which reassembles and reflects the culture of the West: the white man takes his own mythology, Indo-European mythology, his own 'logos', that is, the 'mythos' of his idiom, for the universal form of that he must still wish to call Reason." (Chagani np)

Derrida argues that only through **Deconstruction or decentering** do we escape the language and society's inherent marginaliztion of the other. Similar to Foucault's notion of **rupture**, deconstruction involves allowing the central terms to become marginalized so that the marginalized terms temporarily overthrow the power that has oppressed them.

It should be evident by this point that most of the language based theories[2] of PostModernism focus on the following threads:

1. **Information Economy**. The creation of knowledge as a commodity and performativity, the creation of knowledge not based on a search for truth, but in search of research that will lead to more research.
2. **Digitality as metanarrative.** The role that mass media plays in the construction of both reality and hyper-reality.
3. **Power, knowledge, and language.** The role of traditional language usage in the creation of and perpetuation of power.
4. **Decentering**. The empowering of the other by removing the false center from language.

De-constructing Forensics

Forensics, as an activity, is, in itself, a Postmodern phenomena. Although collegiate debates and debating societies date back to the Greek Academies, the construct we call intercollegiate Forensics, is a relatively new construct. As such, the activity itself is highly sensitive to many of the spoken and unspoken tenets of Postmodernism. One classic example is the simple fact that this activity has shown little tolerance for language which aims to marginalize traditionally marginalized groups. Within the protective circle of forensics, lifestyles, activities, groups, and beliefs that are marginalized by the status quo are protected and given a voice. Despite the fear that this application may be merely an act of performativity, each of the four threads previously isolated will be applied to forensics in hopes of gaining some pedagogic

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[2] I consciously chose to ignore PostModern theories of art, architecture, music, film, and other non-linguistic theories due to time and space limitations.

insight.

Information Economy. Knowledge has always been a form of power. In our PostModern society, it is not the strength of the logic or emotional appeals of the knowledge that gives it power, it is, in many ways, the sheer weight of the information. As information has become a commodity, we have moved away from analysis and toward the old debate practice of "counting cards." Debate has faced this problem for some time in that as more and more information is available that may relate to the proposition, the debater becomes responsible for finding more and more of that data. This propagates a simple, but powerful fallacy: "if there is a propensity of data that says x, then x must be true." Logically, we can see this as a fallacy, each new truth must fight through mountains of old data that is no longer "true." If debate is taught as a logical application of language in the search for consensual truth, then we must teach our students that just because there are more pieces of data that agree with an argument, it is not necessarily a sound argument.

We must do this not only in the classroom and in practice sessions, but we must do it as judges. The simple fact is that we cannot be completely up to date on all the latest research about every possible new topic. Yet, many judges in both public address and debate forums give more weight to a propensity of data rather than the skill the student exhibits in constructing an argument with whatever data he or she may have found.[3]

With the advent of electronic databases, and the ease of access of search engines on the Internet, it is becoming possible for even the weakest of arguments to create the illusion of a

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[3] Do not read this as a call for reducing the number of sources in either debate or public address. This is merely a call for judges and coaches to stress argumentation and logic rather than wealth of data.

wealth of data. Another critical issue for coaches and judges to address is the simple notion of source credibility. If a student accepts, or the judges propagate, the belief that the number of sources is as important as the credibility of the source, then we degenerate to a scavenger hunt. This is further complicated by the self-referential action of the internet. Sources create an illusion of truth by referring to other pages which are basically the same argument posited on the first page. Yet, if any of you assign research papers in your classes, you know that students raised in this information economy see each of these as separate pieces of data to pile onto their argument. Students, and perhaps coaches and judges, need to be trained in evaluating the credibility of sources from electronic sources. This concept leads directly into the next thread, "digitality as metanarrative."

Digitality as metanarrative. The students we see in classes and in forensics today have never known life without the saturation of mass media. In fact, most traditionally aged college students are more visually literate than they are traditionally literate. They have little trouble understanding the meaning intended by the rapidly flashing images of television or the internet, yet they often struggle with simple traditional texts from literature. For these individuals, their reality is often totally shaped by the mass media. This is compounded by the fact that for many of these individuals, the reality portrayed by the mass media is often "more real" than the day to day life that they see merely as dreary background. The new media is also considerably more interesting because it is constantly being tailored to the individual interests of the audience.

This world view is, in my opinion, slowly bleeding students away from this activity. Students who demonstrated the intellectual capacity and curiosity that forensics requires are the same students who are on the forefront of the digital frontier. Students who would, just a few

years ago, be known for spending hours in the library stacks searching for an obscure fact to complete a speech are now firmly planted in front of their computer, but are living their life on the Web. For these students, whose curiosity about the world once drove them to libraries; the library is too old, too slow, and too arcane to bother with. The hyper-reality of the internet, the speed at which they can retrieve mountains of information, and the ability to instantly feed curiosity and "experience" any number of realities is much more inviting than stale doughnuts, old coffee, and hours in creaky university vehicles.

This is a difficult issue for the activity simply because it is going to be difficult for the activity to address the issue. We have coaches who speak openly against the practice of selling tapes of national championship rounds or allowing access to databases and the Web in extemp prep rooms. I think that calls for virtual tournaments or any other infusion of technology into the activity (beyond programs for tabbing tournaments) will fall on deaf ears.

Power, knowledge, and language. The dance of language and power has brought about one of the ugliest phenomena of my existence: political correctness. I do not mean that making students aware of the relationship between language choice and marginalizing groups is a negative thing. However, blindly requiring use of a language that completely ignores the relationship of language and power with a kind of artificial equality is not education. It is indoctrination. The Political Correctness movement assumes a Borg-like community where all involved share power equally at all times. Reality, and hyper-reality, simply do not support this version of human interaction. We are not equal at all times. Power is inequitably divided and merely changing the language that describes a position where one lacks power does not empower them. While professing that complete equality is a positive outcome, it is not a workable scenario in current

society.

Political correctness is a dangerous panacea. It not only fails to reflect "reality" it fails to prepare our students for the language games that they will face in competition and in their professional lives. Part of the beauty of language is the way in which it reflects power and portrays the dynamic flow of power within the social hierarchy. Political correctness removes that aspect of the language from public view, but the machinations of power and language merely become hidden and even more dangerous.

A primary example of this is the choice of literature. I coach and teach at a Historically Black University. As such, the overwhelming majority of my competitors are black. Within the realm of political correctness, my students are faced with a conundrum by judges. When they choose to do traditionally "black" pieces, they are rewarded by judges. Yet endless repetitions of "Raisin in the Sun" or "Fences" does little to truly educate the students in interpretation of literature. Instead, they are marginalized. They are rewarded only if they choose works which do not challenge the traditional view of the black interper. If the student chooses to do Shakespeare, or a piece that is "traditionally white" the student is frequently told, on ballots, that they should choose a more appropriate piece. This marginalization occurs, but, thanks to political correctness, the judges who are disempowering these students, are able to do so covertly within the accepted language of the activity.

The relationship of power and language should be a profound overt lesson from this activity. After all, the purpose of the activity is to teach our students to use the language to empower themselves. Thus ballots should not hide in jargon and politically correct language. We should be able to argue, on ballots, as clearly and as profoundly as we expect our students to

argue in rounds. In many ways, the most profound lesson our students can learn is that while language empowers them, each empowerment means that someone else is disempowered. This perspective is a much more powerful force for good than any artifice which hides this interaction.

Decentering. A secondary issue of power and language is embedded in the linguistic community that forensics has become. Any first time competitor or judge is made quickly aware of the fact that they do not know all the proper incantations and spells. The specialized language of the debate round or even in the proper patter in impromptu speeches serve to create a center and a group that is disempowered by that lack of knowledge. For an activity that claims to be preparing students to communicate in the "real world" it seems odd that we insist on artificial devices that clearly empower some and disempower others.

Finally, we should encourage our students to continue to challenge the bounds of society through decentering. This activity, in many ways, engages in decentering at every tournament in that the activity gives a voice to groups which are marginalized within society. The traditional college student is not aware of much of the literature which is performed in tournaments each weekend. If this activity does no more than that, it has served to empower a number of college students who, otherwise, may have found no safe outlet for their world view.

Toward a Sense of Conclusion

As stated earlier, it seems odd, to me, to attempt to apply the tenets of Postmodernism to an activity that seems to be born (in its current incarnation) out of Postmodernism. Yet it is clear that we, as coaches and judges, must pay close attention to training our students in the use of language as a creator of social power.

It also seems clear that we should reinforce and reward this activity's frequent soapbox for

marginalized voices; yet we must balance this with the desire to place students into categories and, therefore, continue their marginalization. We, as coaches and judges, must become aware of the way language constructs our metanarrative. If we can gain insight into the way language has shaped our world view and prejudices, perhaps we can keep from forcing our world view on our students and, perhaps, we can help our students to escape the way language has defined them as individuals.

As one who was pulled, by this activity, directly from the hollows of Appalachia into a social class that would have otherwise been denied me; I uniquely appreciate the power for forensics. From a Postmodern view, it becomes essential that each of us also see how we wield that power as a coach and as a judge.

I end this rant with a warning that is relevant to all PostModern analysis, as voiced by Michel Foucault:

> "Deliverance here has a paradoxical meaning. The dungeon, the chains, the continual spectacle, the sarcasms were, to the sufferer in his delirium, the very element of liberty." (1973 261)

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